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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to explore the ways effective elementary school principals use their listening skills in conversations with their teachers to better understand them, make decisions, and make sense of the day-to-day operations of their schools. Additionally, teachers' perceptions of their effective principals' listening skills were investigated to better understand the impact that those listening skills have on teachers and their work. Subjects interviewed were six elementary school principals with reputations for excellence. Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to explore the sense-making strategies of school leaders. Full-time teachers who worked for the principals for a year or more completed written Likert-style surveys about their listening skills. Results fell into five major themes: perceptions of listening styles; listening to build trust and relationships; keeping up with what was going on in the building; listening to make decisions; and the need of teachers to be listened to by their principals. The principals in the study expressed intense frustration at the fact that there simply were not enough hours in the day to do everything they needed to do. Elementary school principals face extraordinary pressure from their schools' stakeholders to be successful. Effective principals will lead more effective schools, and the benefits will be passed on to students. (NKA)

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School Leaders and the Strategic Impact of Listening

By

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International Listening Association

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School Leaders and the Strategic Impact of Listening

Lee Iacocca stated,

> I only wish I could find an institute that teaches people how to listen. After all, a good manager needs to listen at least as much as he [sic] needs to talk. Too many people fail to realize that good communication goes in both directions (Purdy, 1997, p.4).

According to Shotter (1993, p. 148), "it is not yet more or different theory that we need in management studies, but a better understanding of conversation and conversational realities." Effective principals are not successful because they find and apply brilliant theories. They are successful because they are able to sort out and make intelligent sense of the disordered jumble of impressions with which they must deal. This ability to construct sensible meaning begins with listening.

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways effective elementary school principals use their listening skills in conversations with their teachers to better understand them, make decisions, and make sense of the day-to day operations of their schools. In addition, the perceptions of the effective principals' teachers of their principals' listening skills was investigated in order to better understand the impact that those listening skills have on teachers and their work. The word "effective" for the purpose of this study means "a reasonable and prudent person . . . [who] leads a school and the profession forward – always keeping a primary focus on mission, improvement, and distinction" (Dunklee, 2000, p. 5).

Too many principals get caught up in "administrivia" and daily crises of their working days. They are not aware that there are almost endless things that can affect individuals' perceptions when they talk to one another. If they were more sensitive to the fact that each individual filters conversations through his or her own unique perspective, principals would be one giant step closer to understanding the needs and motivations of their teachers. That understanding would lead to the development of shared meaning and a more effective way of accomplishing the goals of the school.

In the quest to become effective leaders, school principals need to understand the day-to-day experiences and concerns of their faculties and staffs. (Marlow, 1992). They need to carefully listen to what members of their organizations worry about, are motivated by and are frustrated by. They need to sense what their followers feel and want as they go about their work. If effective leading is about bringing people together to accomplish specific goals, and recognizing and appreciating different perspectives, then leading requires collaboration in which all members of the organization are open to listen to others and being influenced by them – listening to reflect and learn before decisions are made.

Careful listening to teachers seems to be the key for allowing principals to make sense of their day to day routines. In order to learn more about how principals do this, this researcher conducted a qualitative study of six elementary school principals, who had reputations for excellence, to answer to following research questions: What kinds of listening skills do elementary principals selected for this study have? Are these principals' perceptions of their own listening skills similar to the perceptions that the members of their faculties have of their principals' listening skills? Do these principals

use their listening skills to learn about the needs of their staffs and what motivates them? How do these principals use listening to build trust with teachers? Do these principals demonstrate similar listening skills? Do these principals demonstrate dissimilar listening skills according to gender differences?

The literature holds significant implications for the conceptual framework of this study. If the research on deep listening and decision-making can be applied to principals in school settings, the following statements would be found to be true in this research:

- Individuals use deep listening skills to better understand others, and effective principals have acquired those skills to help them understand the viewpoint of their individual teachers.
- There are gender differences in communication, and effective principals are aware of these differences and use their listening skills to help teachers of either gender feel comfortable and understood.
- Leaders of organizations can use their deep listening skills to perceive the needs of employees and make them feel more valued, and effective principals use their listening skills to build respect and shared meaning.
- Principals are frequently thrust into ongoing situations and are called on to make decisions with bits and pieces of information. Effective principals use their listening skills to gather and build on ideas with teachers in order to find solutions that benefit students and the school community.

Research Methods

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to explore the sense-making strategies of school leaders. This researcher wanted to know how selected school leaders who were known for good practice and good relationships with their faculties, listen to teachers to make sense of their workdays. The listening skills of the principals selected for this study, their perceptions of their own listening skills, and their staffs' perceptions of their principals' listening skills were investigated. How these selected principals used their skills to understand their staffs and what motivated them and how they used their listening skills to build trust with their teachers was examined. In addition, the interview accounts and survey data were examined to see if the principals used similar listening skills and if the gender of the principal made a difference in how they used their listening skills.

Information was collected by conducting personal interviews with six elementary school principals in a large suburban school division that was located near a large metropolitan area in the Mid Atlantic Region. Three central office administrators with the title of Director of Elementary Education were contacted. Their job responsibilities included the direct supervision of school-based principals. They were asked to nominate eight to 10 elementary school principals who, in their opinions, exemplified best practices in the administration of their schools and whom they perceived as establishing strong relationships with teachers in their schools. Three female and three male principals were selected to be interviewed from those recommendations.

After the principals were interviewed, a written survey was distributed to the full-time teachers on the staffs of the principals that were interviewed in order to get a general idea of how teachers perceived their principals' listening skills. A full-time teacher who worked for each of the respective principals was interviewed.

Research for this study provided accounts and data from principals and their teachers regarding the ways effective elementary school principals use their listening skills in conversations with their teachers to better understand them, make decisions, and make sense of the day-to day operations of their schools.

Full-time teachers who worked for the principals for a year or more completed written Likert style surveys about their listening skills. One full-time teacher who worked for each respective principal for a year or more was interviewed.

This researcher analyzed the interview accounts and survey data using qualitative methods where categories and themes across the interviews were coded. Descriptive quantitative methods were used in which the number of answers to questions in the teacher surveys were tallied and converted to percentages. The information from the accounts and data were combined to create a more complete picture of the listening skills of the six principals.

Results

After analyzing the research, it was found that the results fell into five major themes. Those themes included:

- Perceptions of listening styles

- Listening to build trust and relationships
- Keeping up with what was going on in the building
- Listening to make decisions
- The need of teachers to be listened to by their principals

Perceptions of Listening Skills

Every principal interviewed for this study sincerely believed that he or she listened well. Toward the beginning of each of the interviews the principals gave what sounded like stock answers or answers they may have assumed made them sound as though they listened well. One principal said she used direct eye contact and good body language. Another principal insisted that she used active listening skills although she did not elaborate about what active listening skills were. Yet another principal talked about unspecified skills that he learned while taking sensitivity training in college.

As the interviews progressed, principals relaxed and shared how they listened on a day-to-day basis in order to learn what their teachers thought and felt. They broadened their definitions of listening behaviors to those that were more than simply hearing words. Listening, to them, was gathering information to help them better understand their teachers and what was going on in their schools. In their own words, principals discussed how they needed to stand back and observe or sit back and listen without talking. They spoke of listening to teachers and the messages between the lines. As they did this, they interpreted the utterances, body language, and physical manifestations of teachers with whom they interacted to discover a greater meaning than could be conveyed simply in words. Two principals discussed how they went even further to consciously frame their listening in the background, culture, and prior experiences of the

speaker. It was clear to me that all of the principals envisioned themselves as understanding or even compassionate school leaders.

Many of the responses of the principal and teacher interview participants reflected personal connections between the principals and their respective teachers. All six teachers who were interviewed mentioned that their principals had open door policies, and all six teachers mentioned that their respective principals listened to the concerns of teachers in their buildings. All the teacher interview participants seemed to have a strong perception that they had access to the principal whenever they needed it. Four of the six teacher interview participants said they could joke around, laugh, or have fun with their principals. Five of the six teachers said that their principals were caring and considerate, and five of the six teachers mentioned that they collaborated with their principals on decisions that affected the school.

However, it seemed significant to me that the principals did not speak about many of the things that were important to the teachers who were interviewed. Only three principals mentioned that they listened to the concerns of their respective teachers. Not a single principal mentioned having fun or joking around with their respective teachers in order to build personal connections with them and to build trust.

Teacher interview and survey participants noticed the physical behaviors their respective principals used when they listened to them. When principals asked questions of teacher during the conversation, teachers felt as though their principals were really listening to them. Most teachers who were interviewed or surveyed responded that their principals gave them adequate time to talk. The exception was a teacher who wished

aloud that her principal would sit down with every teacher for 10 or 15 minutes just to talk with them and make them feel more valued.

It was very important to the teachers in this study that the principals give them their full attention when they listened. They said that when their principals listened to them, their principals made what they said seem valuable or meaningful. All of the principals, to a lesser or greater degree, demonstrated deep listening skills that seemed to help them better understand what motivated their teachers.

Listening to Build Trust and Relationships.

The level of trust between a principal and his or her teachers would suggest that a listening relationship had been established. A teacher's perception of his or her relationship with his or her respective principal was used as an indicator of whether or not there was some degree of trust between the two of them.

Every principal described with value-laden words the ways in which they built trust. Several principals said they never broke confidences. Another principal thought that it was important to accept the faults of his teachers, just as he hoped they would accept his own faults. Two principals said they made a point of letting their teachers know they genuinely cared about them. One principal stated that he had a personal theory that caring and trust are intertwined.

In addition to the positive values expressed about building trust, most principals seemed to solicit the opinions of their teachers. Those principals seemed to appreciate and look forward to collaborating with their teachers. In addition, four of the principals mentioned that they delegated responsibilities to teachers, encouraged them to participate

in staff development activities, and try new ideas. As Frank, the principal at Lincoln, said, " Give them wings and they fly."

The interviewed teachers indirectly expressed their trust in their principals by describing their informal professional relationships with them. They liked having principals who were accessible to them. Two teachers seemed almost proud that they could joke around with their principals. Another simply enjoyed the good-natured humor that her principal used to communicate with the staff. Another teacher mentioned how much fun was to be with her principal.

Teachers appreciated the opportunities to give their opinions about things that affected the school. They liked the idea that they could share concerns with the principal if they felt a need. It was important to teachers in this study for their respective principals to demonstrate that they cared about the teachers with whom they worked. One teacher seemed to find it meaningful that his principal made it clear that teachers' families had a priority over anything associated with school. Listening lent a personal touch to the relationships between the principals and their teachers in this study. That personal caring helped build the trust that the principals seemed to find so important in understanding their teachers better.

Keeping Up with What Was Going on in the Building

The principal participants either directly or indirectly addressed the issue of how they managed to be knowledgeable about what was going on in the building. Most said they visited classrooms and other parts of the school as often as they could. Two talked about sitting in on numerous staff and committee meetings. The same two principals deliberately selected point persons or subject area team leaders to keep them informed.

There was a general feeling among the principals that there were not enough hours in the day to know everything that was going on in the school. Some mentioned arriving early and staying late. Another principal accepted calls from teachers on the weekends. The principals listed a myriad of tasks for which they were responsible. One principal said that sometimes the teachers would "pick, pick, pick" at her, and another principal was nostalgic about the days before he quit smoking when he had an excuse to take a break from the demands of his work to slip outside for a cigarette. A very experienced principal admitted that there was no way that he could keep up with everything that went on in the building.

In contrast to what the principals said, all six teacher interview participants were convinced that their principals were very well informed about what went on in the building. However, the principals and teachers had a different perspective on what it meant to be informed. When principals discussed how they listened to be informed about the school, they tended to refer mainly to curriculum and personnel issues. Teachers referred more often to teacher unrest and staff morale concerns. This probably was due to the different outlooks and responsibilities of both groups.

Listening to Make Decisions

All of the principals used their listening skills to make decisions that affected the school, and they all had some type of formal or informal collaborative decision-making process in place. Once again, they referred to instruction and issues that affected the entire school. For example, several principals specifically described how they sought opinions from teachers regarding the hiring of new staff members. Another principal described how she asked for and received copious input about the design of a new

program of the school. The principals seemed comfortable in their belief that the teachers in their schools were included in the decision-making process.

All of the teachers felt that they were included in the decision-making process as well. The decisions that they discussed included the hiring of staff members, writing school plans, and the design and execution of instruction in their own classrooms. There seemed to be no question that their opinions were important to the principal when it came to making decisions affecting the whole school.

The Need of Teachers to Be Listened to By Their Principals

It was clear that teachers needed to have their respective principals listen to them. Some of the comments that teachers made about their principals were quite poignant. One teacher described the way her principal listened by saying, "She's all yours." Another teacher concluded the description of the way his principal listened by saying, "I always felt as if at that moment, what we were discussing was important and valued." The need of those teachers to have the ear of their principals was summed up by a teacher who said, "If she could just sit down and talk for 10 or 15 minutes, [teachers] would feel more valued as people."

All six principals told stories that indicated that they listened to teachers with empathy. One principal spoke of the deep respect she had for the confidences that teachers shared with her. Another related brief examples of the concerned questions he asked teachers concerning their personal worlds. Even the principal who referred to difficult staff members as "piss asses" spoke of crying with her teachers as they shared personal fears and concerns with her.

Five of the principals in this study lamented the lack of time they had to listen adequately. They seemed to know the value of time spent listening to teachers. They revealed feelings of guilt and frustration over the fact that they knew they needed more time to listen to teachers, but their countless responsibilities kept them from spending the time necessary to do so. They knew that to make sense of their workdays and to understand what went on around them, they had to continue to try.

Implications for Principals

Bennis (1997) suggested that the major characteristics people want in their leaders is a sense of purpose, a sense of trust, optimism, and the ability to obtain results. Therefore, it is crucial for elementary school principals to listen carefully to the members of their faculties. This must be done in order for principals to hear between the lines of what faculty members are saying in order to sort out the barrage of information and conversations they deal with most of the day every day. When they listen carefully they will be better able to make sense of the endless swirl of words, activity, and responsibility that surrounds them.

Listening, to principals who use best practices and have good relationships with their teachers, is far more than simply decoding the words that they hear teachers saying. They listen to make sense of the situation. These principals take as many circumstances as they can into consideration as they try to understand what the spoken words of teachers mean. They take details into account such as the background, experiences, or gender of the teachers to whom they listen. Physical manifestations of teachers' .

discomfort such as botchy skin are noted. They observe teachers interacting with colleagues or taking part in meetings. Listening is acquiring a sense of the contexts of teachers' lives and what the words they say mean to them.

By understanding their respective teachers, principals can build strong relationships and positive climates in their buildings. These principals know what goes on in the building as it pertains to instruction or morale. They listen to teachers to make wise decisions that benefit the students, staff, and parents. Listening to understand paid off for the principals in this study in that they had strong instructional programs and most of them had a school climate of trust and respect.

Elementary school principals face extraordinary pressure from their schools' stakeholders to be successful. They are expected to raise standardized test scores, maintain discipline, teach character traits, keep students and faculty safe and happy, ensure that parents are in the overall picture, and any number of other real or perceived expectations while leading staff members and upholding morale. What mere humans could possibly live up to those expectations?

The principals in this study expressed intense frustration at the fact that there simply were not enough hours in the day to do everything they needed to do. Various leaders coped by arriving at school early, staying late, and taking telephone calls long after students and teachers went home. During the day they roamed the halls, held meetings, observed teachers, and analyzed instruction. They disciplined children, fielded complaints, met with parents, and longed for a few minutes just to stop and think. All the while they listened. As one principal said, "Sometimes, I just listen and listen and listen."

The principals in this study were selected based on simple criteria. Their supervisors recommended them because they were known for good practice and for having good relationships with their faculties. In short, they were perceived by individuals with knowledge of their work to be effective leaders.

What are effective leaders? Effective leaders solve problems and make decisions (Dunklee, 2000). They obtain the most accurate information available, and they include appropriate individuals in the decision-making process. They assess the consequences that the outcome of the decision will have on the school community. Effective principals as effective leaders acquire the best and most accurate information when they have been in the habit of constantly listening to understand.

Effective leaders communicate (Dunklee, 2000). They ascertain what needs to be heard, and then they send the needed messages. They discreetly monitor gossip and smalltalk in order to take action when needed. Principals as effective leaders must be able to hear the real meaning in the barrage of words and activity that surrounds them. They must know their teachers well, and they learn their teachers by listening.

Effective leaders demonstrate sensitivity (Dunklee, 2000). They sense the anxieties and needs of others and respond to those emotions effectively and gracefully. They understand that individuals bring a plethora of backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions to the workplace. Principals as effective leaders observe, hear, absorb, and interpret verbal and nonverbal messages in order to "read between the lines" and to understand.

One could add that effective leaders are compassionate. Effective principals know their teachers work hard in a sometimes lonely and always demanding profession.

They understand that even the most gifted teachers need positive attention and occasional praise. They sense that having a good laugh with a teacher is always time well spent. Effective principals realize that on some days, babies, grandbabies, or spouses are more important than multiplication facts or state capitals.

"Long-term leadership is predicated on the leader's ability to identify, understand, respond to, and continuously manage the perceptions of others" (Dunklee, 2000, p. 91). Principals need to carefully listen to what staff members worry about, what motivates them, and what frustrates them. Principals know what is important to teachers because they "listen and listen and listen". Effective principals will lead more effective schools, and the benefits will be passed on to students.

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